

Grice, Herod, Bandaged Legs (Stephen Neale, Seminar 3)

On the way to characterizing the complexity of the sort of intention he took to be characteristic of speaker meaning, Grice discusses the case of Herod presenting Salome with the severed head of St John the Baptist on a platter. Suppose, counterfactually, that Herod had decided to inform Salome that John was dead not by presenting her with John's head but by saying

- (1) John the Baptist is dead.

We should want to say the following:

- (a) by uttering (1) to Salome, Herod *meant* that John the Baptist was dead, and
- (b) if Salome recognised that this is what Herod meant, then Herod successfully communicated to her that John the Baptist was dead.

Herod's success consisted in Salome's recognising that this is what *he, Herod, the speaker* meant, not in her understanding what the *sentence* he uttered meant. Still, let us suppose, quite reasonably, that

- (c) Salome's understanding the sentence Herod used played a significant role in her recognising that what Herod meant was that John the Baptist was dead, and
- (d) Herod expected Salome's understanding of the sentence he uttered to play just such a role.

What we *seem* to have here *speaker* meaning piggy-backing on *linguistic* meaning, on the use of system of representations that have specific meanings by virtue of specific conventions. But we do not want to preclude the possibility of someone meaning and successfully communicating something to someone else without using a sentence of a language or, indeed, anything that has a conventional meaning.

Suppose that Herod himself presented Salome with John's severed head. Was Herod engaged in an *act of meaning*? Did Herod *mean* something by presenting John's severed head to Salome? For the sake of argument, let's assume that Salome knew John well and was very familiar with his face (and most recent hairstyle), and that the severed head was fresh, otherwise undamaged, and not covered with blood or anything else that might obscure the identity of the person whose head it was.

Grice (1957)

This is what Grice originally said this about the case:

Herod intended to make Salome believe that St John the Baptist was dead and no doubt also intended Salome to recognise that he intended her to believe that St John the Baptist was dead... Yet I certainly do not think that we should want to say that we have here [a] case of meaning_{NN} (Grice 1957: 382; 1989: 218).

He might have a stronger or weaker thesis in mind here. For the moment, suppose his point is that we should not want to say that, by presenting Salome with John's severed head, Herod meant that John the Baptist was dead. (The stronger thesis is that Herod did not mean anything.)

The problem, as Grice sees it, is that an element of *natural meaning* precludes this from being a case of speaker meaning. As Sperber and Wilson put it, Grice aimed to separate cases of someone meaning that p' from 'cases of displaying direct evidence that p'. Grice had the following intuition:

Herod intended to make Salome believe that St John the Baptist was dead and no doubt also intended Salome to recognise that he intended her to believe that St John the Baptist was dead... Yet I certainly do not think that we should want to say that we have here [a case] of [non-natural] meaning... What we want to find is the difference between, for

example, “deliberately and openly letting someone know” and “telling”, and between “getting someone to think” and “telling” (Grice 1957: 382; 1989: 218).

The idea is that *S*'s meaning that *p* by doing something goes beyond that *S*'s providing *natural evidence* for *p* (a *natural indicator* that *p*), beyond *showing* that *p* is the case. It is like “telling” someone that *p*, not just a case of “deliberately and openly letting someone know” that *p*. To present John's severed head to Salome is to present her with *natural evidence* that John is dead. His severed head *means* (naturally) that he is dead. Herod is “deliberately and openly” letting Salome know that John is dead.

Solution: Add the notorious third clause to the definition of speaker meaning

Schiffer (1972)

One thing that might be said is that in presenting Salome with the head of St. John the Baptist, Herod might mean that St. John the Baptist was dead. This does not strike me as a wildly implausible thing to say. Consider an analogous case.

(3a) *A*: “Let's play squash.”

S: Holds up bandaged leg.

Here, I think, one would say, intuitively, that by holding up his leg *S* meant that he could not play, or that he could not play because his leg was injured; yet it would seem that the only difference between (3) [the Herod case, SN] and (3a) which is possibly relevant is that the “inference” *A* has to make in the “bandaged leg” example is slightly less direct than in the case of St. John the Baptist's head, although in both cases one could make the relevant inference without any assistance on the part of *S*. Grice has objected to me that while we may say that (in (3a)) *S* meant he could not play squash by holding up his bandaged leg, he could not mean thereby that his leg is bandaged. But, in the first place, even this is not an objection to the point I am trying to make, which is that there is no relevant difference between (3) and (3a), so that if we may say that *S* meant that he could not play squash, then—by parity of reason—we may say that Herod meant that St. John the Baptist was dead (it was not suggested that Herod meant that there was a severed head on his charger). In the second place, I think that it is false that *S* could not mean that his leg was bandaged by holding up his bandaged leg. Consider (3b):

(3b) *A*: “I've heard that your leg is bandaged. Is it true?”

S: Holds up bandaged leg.

Here, I think, one would say that *S* meant that his leg was bandaged. (Schiffer 1972: 56)

Sperber and Wilson (1986)

What we have tried to show... is that there are not two distinct and well-defined classes, but a continuum of cases of ostension ranging from “showing”, where strong direct evidence for the basic layer of information is provided, to “saying

Neale (1990)

My initial reaction to clause (3) was based on examples involving the use of language:

It is not clear to me that this additional condition is necessary. The same degree of manifestness seems to be present in certain cases involving properly *linguistic* utterances. Consider an utterance of, e.g., ‘I can speak English’, or an utterance of ‘I can speak in squeaky voice’ said in a squeaky voice (I owe the latter example to Neil Smith), or an

utterance of 'I am over here' bawled across a crowded room at someone known to be looking for the utterer (this example is due to Schiffer (1972)). In none of these cases is there a temptation to say that the speaker did not mean what he or she said.... [I]n the light of the similarities between these cases and those that worried Grice, I do not feel the need for an additional constraint on utterer's meaning...that is supposed to prevent (e.g.) Herod from meaning that St. John the Baptist was dead, or Bill from meaning that his leg was bandaged. (Neale 1990: 106 n 18.)

Sperber and Wilson (2015)

Suppose Salome has never seen John the Baptist before, and is unable to recognise him. Then for her, seeing a severed head would not be compelling evidence that John is dead. When the head is shown to her by Herod, the evidence is stronger, because it is combined with recognition of his intention. This revised scenario seems to involve both direct and indirect evidence (i.e. both showing and meaning): Herod showed Salome that the person whose head he is displaying was dead, and meant that this person was John. Of course, Herod also overtly intended Salome to think that he was responsible for John's death, and that he had had John killed to satisfy her wishes; since these were not wholly evidenced by John's severed head, they must have been meant. (2015: 120)

Perhaps Grice could have said that as long as recognition of the communicator's intention plays a role – however small – in the addressee's coming to the intended conclusion, the case is one of meaning. This seems to fit with his stipulation, in the third clause of his definition, that the audience's recognition of the utterer's intention should be “at least part” of their reason for producing the intended response. It would follow that any case of ‘showing that’ in which the evidence for the intended conclusion was less than decisive would have to be reclassified as a case of ‘meaning that’. But surely, if the part played by recognition of the utterer's intention can vary from 100% to less than 1%, then many, if not most, cases of showing a piece of evidence seem to involve meaning, and the common sense understanding of meaning, and of the distinction between showing that and meaning that, is lost. A more sensible response would be to study the whole continuum – characterised by its two end points of pure meaning and pure showing – as such, and get rid of the third clause. However, this amounts either to extending the notion of speaker's meaning way beyond what is intuitively recognisable as such, or to demoting it from its central theoretical role to a loosely descriptive use that may nonetheless be adequate when dealing with fairly standard cases of linguistic communication. (2015: 120)

It is possible to mean and show the same thing:

When asked who is the tallest pupil in the class, the teacher points to an individual who at first sight is the tallest in the class (although some pupils might be absent) and says, “He is.” She both means that the pupil she is pointing at is the tallest (since some of the evidence for the intended conclusion comes from her intentions), and displays direct evidence that he is the tallest. (2015: 124)

Intentions, Informative Intentions, Communicative Intentions, Meaning Intentions

There is a hierarchy here that we need to understand.

An “absence of intention” third clause

S does *not* intend that *A*'s recognition that *S* intends *A* to think that *p* should be *no part* of *A*'s reason for coming to think that *p*. Would this work?